

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

MORE-THAN-SURVIVAL STRATEGIES:
SEX WORKERS' UNHAPPY STORIES

By

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Abstract: This essay examines the contributions of unhappy autobiographical narratives to the sex workers' rights movement. Dominating sex worker advocacy discourse is a "happy hooker" image that eschews "negative" and "stereotypical" characterizations of prostitutes and other sex workers. But as the internet becomes more and more a site for sex work activism, some unhappy whores are using online autobiographical practices to resist this disavowal of negative experience. While reluctant or coerced engagements in sex work are often referred to as "survival sex work," unhappy sex workers' online writing practices function as a *more-than-survival* strategy, politicizing and resisting rather than disavowing the harms they experience in sex work. After reviewing literary and geographical scholarship on the political disenfranchisement of sex workers and situating this disenfranchisement in Judith Butler's analysis of "the bad life," this paper presents two close readings of sex workers' online autobiographical practices. The first analyzes the discourse of disavowal of unhappy experience in sex worker advocacy and its harmful effects on unhappy sex workers. The second close reading discusses sex workers' stories about exiting the sex industry, highlighting sex workers' use of metaphors of space and place to elucidate their experiences. The essay concludes on sex workers' strategies for more-than-surviving: using the three politicizing tactics identified by Butler to resist their expulsion to the bad life.

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And thank you both for your patient and creative teaching.

From early on, speaking for myself meant straining to somehow fit my experiences and my opinions of my own experience—at times, it felt, of my very self—into one of two dichotomous positions: for or against.

— Melissa Petro “The H-Word”

I remember when I first got involved in sex worker rights and was a naively impressionable young woman... when I mentioned that I didn't like sex work myself I was chastised by fellow activists.

— Wendy Babcock “Can A Person Be A Sex Worker Rights Activist”

Many people prefer the word “survivor” to “victim” because “survivor” feels strong and proactive. I understand that, as that is precisely how I felt for a long time also, but I started to think that we need to honor and embrace weakness, vulnerability, and passivity as well, or else we end up blaming and invalidating victims (including myself) who do not feel strong some or most of the times.

— Emi Koyama “The Uses of Negativity”

And there are a lot of us, more than most folks realize. We frequently stay closeted ... partly because we may lack the physical energy or emotional stamina to brazenly insert ourselves into the activist communities that dislike us.

— Lori Adorable “Dungeon or Psych Ward?”

It is no longer acceptable to maintain a barrier between conversations about the positive potential of the choice to do transactional sex and the injustices many people face when they do sex work because of circumstance or coercion. To do so is to maintain a class divide that is wide and deep.

— Audacia Ray “Why the Sex Positive Movement is Bad for Sex Workers' Rights”

The truth doesn't have a sound bite. It's complex.

— Hadil Habiba “The Ugly Truth”

Prologue

Initially, I had intended this essay to be an autoethnographic study of the desperate unhappiness I and many other sex workers feel or have felt about having to continue to do sex work long past the point of deciding we wanted out. After four years of applying for jobs, upgrading my education, living hand-to-mouth and directing all of my energy towards the goal of not having to sell sex, I had a question that needed answering: does it feel this bad for everyone?

Frustratingly, when I looked for research that reflected my experience, I mostly found the polemics of the feminist sex wars, tying criminalization to victimization and decriminalization to positivity about the sex industry. There was no political representation for me in abolitionism, as it supports the continued regulation of sex work by the criminal justice system, and there seemed to be no room in the sex workers' rights movement for victimization, for unhappiness, or even for a simple distaste for sex work.

It turned out that attempting to write about my *own* experiences in sex work was bad for my mental health, so I gave up my autoethnographic intentions and began looking at other workers' blogs. By the time this project was near complete, I had learned that while it doesn't feel that bad for *every* exiting sex worker, it does feel that bad for a lot of them. It is comforting to know that I was not alone in how I felt, but it is also frightening.

The primary benefit, for me, of reading other sex workers' unhappy stories is that they provide me with a vocabulary for expressing my own feelings and political positions. Pieced together, the voices of other sex workers can say what I alone could not. The epigraph above is one such piecing-together. This paper develops an argument, as it should, but it also develops that lexicon, with the hope that it will be useful to expand our vocabulary for talking honestly and with complexity about how it feels to do sex work.

Introduction: Happy Hookers and Unhappy Whores

Let's start with a typical hook:

Nikki Thomas doesn't roam city streets in fishnet stockings and tight skirts.

She doesn't have a pimp. She's not a drug addict. She wasn't sexually abused as a child.

But, she is a sex-trade worker — and she's on a mission to erase stereotypes. (Mullins)

With the sex industry increasingly becoming a “mainstream” part of life in the global north (Bretners and Hausbeck), media about sex workers has begun to tell a relatively new story. Rather than painting sex workers as victims and criminals, some texts about sex workers offer an “unexpectedly” positive story, intended to bust stereotypes. Often the story is told by sex workers themselves: “My clients are not gross, I am not addicted to drugs, I was not sexually abused as a child. I am educated and I'm not worried about clients raping and murdering me” (Abraham). But this story is curiously hollow: it says more about what a happy sex working experience is *not* than what it is. The other figure sketched alongside this “happy hooker” image is an “unhappy whore”: victimized, abject, selling sex for survival. While casting sex work in a more positive light is taken as advocacy to reduce stereotypes, it leaves us to question where sex workers who do use drugs, who have been victimized and who don't want to sell sex fit into the sex workers' rights movement.

As the internet becomes more and more a site for sex work activism, some unhappy whores are using online autobiographical practices to resist the disavowal of their negative experience. The intention of this essay is to look more closely at unhappy whores' experiences and the contributions their stories make to sex workers' rights activism. While reluctant or coerced engagements in sex work are often referred to as “survival sex work,” unhappy sex

workers' online writing practices function as a *more-than-survival* strategy, politicizing and resisting rather than disavowing the harms they experience in sex work.

This paper is organized around two close readings of sex workers' autobiographical writing practices and their context. Beginning with a review of literary and geographical scholarship on sex workers, I introduce the interdisciplinary perspective of this research and then briefly outline the methods by which I chose sex workers' blogs and blog comments for analysis. In the section "Good Lives and Bad Lives," I draw on work by Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed to situate the discursive and spatial denial of sex workers' political citizenship within theory that explains how lives and feelings are marked as "good" or "bad," speakable or unspeakable.

The first of the two close readings examines the discourse of disavowal of unhappy experience and the push back against this discourse in sex workers' writings. I show how unhappy whores are materially and affectively harmed by this discourse. The second close reading discusses sex workers' trajectories on trying to exit the sex industry. While workers get trapped materially, they use images of space, location and mobility to provide themselves some affective distance. The essay concludes on sex workers' strategies for more-than-surviving: using three politicizing tactics identified by Butler to resist their expulsion to the bad life.

Literature Review

The research literatures in geography and literary studies on sex work, autobiography, online writing, and the work of space in identify-formation are too expansive for summary here. Instead, because this is an interdisciplinary project, I aim to build a foundation for my argument by showing how the perspectives of literary studies and geography might compliment and complicate one another. This section discusses literary research on sex workers' online writing

and then geographical research on sex workers' access to political citizenship. Most literature on sex workers' use of the internet comes from the social sciences, documenting how technological change has affected the ways sex workers do business (e.g., Bernstein, Parsons et al.). Less has been written about sex workers' online communications as *literature*. But sex workers' online autobiographical writing fits into a history of autobiographies written from the margins.

According to Carolyn Steedman, economically marginalized women's autobiographies were once forced out of them in what Steedman calls the "autobiographical injunction": "a history of expectations, orders and instructions, rather than one of urges and desires" that extracted poor women's sad stories as they appealed for welfare or servant work (28). Liz Stanley describes how the autobiographical injunction continues in the present day, as informal bits of life narratives are coerced from people by the systems and institutions that organize their lives (43). These short, mundane testimonies are not formalized as autobiographies, but happen instead as parts of other events, such as applying for social assistance, or having a marriage, birth or death recorded by the state (41). Stanley refers to these testimonies as "autobiographical practices": ways of relating oneself to the world via "the myriad of everyday and frequently fleeting social practices concerned with the articulation of (often competing, sometimes discontinuous) notions of 'selves' and 'lives'" (40). Sex worker writers, as marginalized persons and as feminist advocates in contemporary feminism's "testimonial culture" (Ahmed and Stacey), are subject to this autobiographical injunction as their stories are solicited, coerced and volunteered as advocacy for human rights and political citizenship.

Carrie Hamilton, in a reading of abolitionist feminist blogs, finds that feminist blogging takes women's first-person voices as "direct experience" and does not address autobiographical practices as mediated representations or memories of an experience that is no longer directly

accessible (87). In the abolitionist rendition of sex workers' testimony, a sex worker is at once someone to be pitied, for her circumstances of unparalleled suffering, and someone to be idealized, as a survivor whose testimony provides direct, transparent, authentic experience (95). The abolitionist blogosphere privileges the voices of sex workers whose stories support the "abuse" paradigm and posts critical feedback mostly from feminists who already agree with the bloggers' position (97). Idealization of supported testimony and disavowal of inconvenient narratives on both sides of the debate keep the two camps strictly opposed.

But while internal critique is limited by the closure of discourse, sex workers who write online are still subject to criticism. The expectation of outsiders critiquing sex workers' blogs is that personal privacy will be sacrificed in exchange for authenticity. Debra Ferreday, writing about the infamous blog of "Belle de Jour," notes that "Belle" was taken by abolitionist feminists as "doubly inauthentic": that is, because her voice was disembodied on the internet, she was suspected of pretending to be a prostitute, and then she was accused to misrepresenting prostitution itself by casting it in a positive light (274). When "Belle" was revealed to be Dr. Brooke Manganti, who had in fact been a prostitute, the question of her authenticity shifted from whether or not she was a real prostitute to whether or not she was a typical prostitute (275). Magnanti's forced outing removed her right to privacy, but her autonomy was further violated by her positioning as a potential representative of sex workers as a whole, and, as a result, by the loss of the specificity of her experience. Or in other words, in response to demands for authenticity and representativeness, Magnanti's *life* was replaced in discourse by a generalizable *story* about prostitution. The autobiographical injunction, coupled with the polarization of discourse on sex work and intense demands for representativeness, places sex workers' individual political citizenship in question. The debate then demands that the sex workers who

are most able to tell a story advocating decriminalization prove that their experiences are more authentic than “negative” stereotypes.

Geographical writing has also focused largely on sex workers’ political citizenship. But rather than compelling sex workers’ visibility, the marginalization of sex workers in real space has involved their *exclusion* from various formations of the public. One of the key findings in geographical literature is that sex workers, and particularly survival sex workers who advertise their services by standing at the curb, are routinely excluded from public space. Phil Hubbard argues that the exclusion of sex workers from public space is a strategy by which the state scapegoats sex workers for moral disorder and then demonstrates its own competence and righteousness through campaigns of revenge that limit sex workers’ and other scapegoats’ right to exist (1696-98). In a similar vein, Geraldine Pratt shows how a “generalized suspension of the law” has left sex workers and other poor women “legally abandoned” in impoverished urban spaces, in the sense theorized by Giorgio Agamben (1053-54). Those who are abandoned have “biological life” but not “political life,” and civil society is dedicated to the definition and maintenance of a “threshold” between the two (1054). Pratt argues that missing and murdered sex workers were made “bare life” through a spatialized process of material and imaginative political abandonment (1063).

There are parallels between the literary and geographic literatures. Sex workers’ occupancy of the “quasi-public sphere” (York) of the internet is contested through attacks on their authenticity and on their real life privacy. Meanwhile, the autobiographical injunction feeds sex workers’ testimony to a polarized feminist movement. In their bid to exist on the internet, sex workers find themselves politically abandoned by large swaths of feminist advocacy, while simultaneously facing political abandonment by the state in the real world. Unhappy sex

workers, with no representation in abolitionism and disavowed by sex workers' advocacy discourse, become absent Others, against whose victimized figures competent and morally-acceptable lives are cast. The geographic and literary paradigms complicate one another as they lead us to ask where discursive political life and abandonment end and their material counterparts begin. If, as Pratt argues, sex workers' abandonment is as much imaginative and historical as literal, and if writing a blog about sex work can have material consequences as severe as Dr. Magnanti's outing, then it seems that how it feels to do sex work *matters*, especially when it feels bad.

Methods

I chose to read blogs instead of print memoirs because indoor sex workers' online activities are a reflection of their material working conditions. The job requires workers to be ready to take a client on very short notice, so many sex workers spend large amounts of time waiting alone for clients to call. Workers upload ads to escorting websites and receive calls using cell phones. When sex workers use social media to connect, they respond to their actual day-to-day working conditions: the isolation, impatience and boredom they might be feeling, along with the economic imperative to remain connected to the internet. As blogger *whoreseyeview* puts it,

Mouthing off on the internet is the only place I get to express my political beliefs with regards to sex work and the lives of women. [...] It is simply the easiest, most accessible, least exhausting way I can connect with other sex workers and share my opinions. ("the tweets")

While there exist many excellent print memoirs authored by sex workers, the accessibility of the internet to a diverse population of sex workers makes blogs an appealing source of information.

To access sex workers' autobiographical writing, I used blogs and articles posted online since 2011. Employing "theory or concept sampling" (Cresswell 2008), I chose posts that I thought would be information-rich resources with which to test an idea. The posts were found using google searches for keywords such as "sex work," "happy hooker," and "exiting," as well as chosen from among links posted to Facebook and Twitter by sex workers in my social network. I interpreted these texts using "close reading." Close reading is a method for literary study, in which both the content (explicit messaging) and the form of a text are analyzed to interpret its significance. The form of a text refers to how it is put together: not the painting, but the brush strokes with which the painting was created (Lynch n.p.). Using this procedure, I analyzed the sex workers' autobiographical writings through the lens of theory that attempts to account for how we separate "good" lives from "bad" ones.

Good Lives and Bad Lives

Judith Butler proposes that as the events of their lives fix them as types of persons, some people are expelled to the "bad life," which precludes them from participating in political life ("Can One Lead"). Taking the question from Theodore Adorno, Butler argues that questions of ethics and politics, or how to live a "good life," are unanswerable for people whose political abandonment marks their lives as valueless, or unrecognizable as lives worth living (10-11). For Butler,

[T]his question becomes most acute for someone, anyone, who already understands him- or herself to be a dispensable sort of being, one who registers at an affective and corporeal level that his or her life is not worth safeguarding, protecting and valuing. [...] From within a felt sense that one's life is ungrievable or dispensable, how does the moral question get formulated, and how does the demand for public grieving take place? In

other words, how do I endeavour to lead a good life if I do not have a life to speak of, or when the life that I seek to lead is considered dispensable, or is in fact already abandoned? When the life that I lead is unliveable, a rather searing paradox follows, for the question, how do I lead a good life?, presumes that *there are lives* to be led; that is, that there are lives recognized as living and that mine is among them. [...]

So if this sort of world – what we might be compelled to call ‘the bad life’ – fails to reflect back my value as a living being, then I must become critical of those categories and structures that produce that form of effacement and inequality. In other words, I cannot affirm my own life without critically evaluating those structures that differentially value life itself. This practice of critique is one in which my own life is bound up with the objects that I think about. My life is this life, lived here, in the spatio-temporal horizon established by my body, but it is also out there, implicated in other living processes of which I am but one. (11)

I quote Butler at length because I want to highlight three characteristics of the model she proposes. First, we see that finding oneself “ungrievable” is not only an intellectual conclusion based on evidence of lousy living conditions. It is a condition that is embodied and intimately felt by those in the bad life. Such close and deep sensations are hard to wish away. Second, life is as much social or relational as it is individual. To ask how to lead a good life, one must find herself among a group of lives already considered to be worth leading. Worthiness is determined in relation to unworthiness. Third, for those inside the bad life, the relation through which one comes to value her life is one of critique of the social order. These themes – affect, relationality, and critique – will recur throughout this essay as I examine the ways in which the happy hooker narrative arose to defend against sex workers’ expulsion to the bad life and the ways in which

unhappy whores attempt to critique the hierarchy that this defense creates in the sex workers' rights movement.

It is through affect that the threshold between bad life and political life is maintained. Affects are gut-level sensations, akin to emotions but felt before they can be interpreted cognitively (Siegworth and Gregg 1). And affects *matter*: Jasbir Puar observes that “societies of control tweak and modulate bodies as matter, not predominantly through signification or identity interpellation but rather through affective capacities and tendencies” (63). For Sara Ahmed,

There is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom. Feelings can get stuck to certain bodies in the very way we describe spaces, situations, dramas. And yes, bodies can get stuck depending on ‘what’ feelings they get associated with. (7)

When an affect gets “stuck” to a body, the distinction between the body and the feeling it causes is eliminated. The capacity to experience, and to lead others to feel, a “good” feeling attaches political value to some bodies, while those who cannot feel or cause happiness are relegated to the bad life. But, writes Ahmed, “the demand for happiness” erases histories of injustice and conceals inequality by making it bad to be unhappy (12). For sex workers with bad working conditions, or those who just hate the sex industry, the bad life is not just a matter of having marginal or malignant working and living conditions. Unhappy whores are also affectively outside of the properly political and valuable. Much as those in the bad life require system-level critique to move into the dimension of the political, those experiencing and causing unhappiness must challenge the association of happiness with value if they wish to have lives that, if lost, would be considered a loss.

The difficulty in launching a system-level critique of the happy hooker story is that the narrative is itself a political gambit. Authentically happy autobiographical practices are required by sex workers' rights advocacy as what abortion advocate Jeannie Ludlow calls a "politically necessary narrative" (28-30). Beyond the politically necessary narrative lie "the things we cannot say": stories that reflect women's everyday experiences, but which support stereotypes that are often employed to oppose women's rights (30). The "defensive" nature of the politically necessary narrative "has circumscribed our own discourse" (30), argues Ludlow, leaving a gap between the autobiographical practices that have political value and women's actual experiences. Sex workers' advocacy leverages the politically necessary narrative of the happy hooker and casts off the narratives of unhappiness that might be appropriated by those who support criminalization of sex workers. As a result, unhappy whores are stuck seeking political representation among either a camp that disavows their experiences or a camp that disavows their rights. In either case, the lack of value assigned to unhappy sex working lives makes it that much more difficult for unhappy sex workers to stage political resistance to the conditions causing their unhappiness. The generation of "the things we cannot say" in sex workers' advocacy discourse is the subject of this paper's first close reading.

I. Being Unhappy in Sex Work

This section examines the organization of sex workers' rights advocacy discourse in a manner that produces "good" and "bad" sex workers through the capacity, or lack thereof, to tell a happy story. Butler, Ahmed and Ludlow show us how political abandonment, affective abandonment and discursive abandonment work together to place unhappy whores in the bad life. Because one's life must be recognized as valuable in order to be political, sex workers' advocacy

discourse makes happiness a prerequisite for politicization. Unhappy sex workers experience affective strain and worsened material conditions as they are subjected to a form of discipline that restricts and transforms, as Puar describes above, their affective capacities.

Sex workers' use of identity and authenticity as politics is a recent phenomenon. Even the premise that a "prostitute" is a type of person one can *be* is a relatively new invention, coming into being only in the mid-1700s (Agustín n.p.). Before that, selling sex was something people *did*. But in contemporary advocacy discourse, being a sex worker is a matter of identity politics. Sex workers' stories are often introduced as a form of testimony, beginning with some variation on the phrase "I am a sex worker." This introduction is the worker's entry ticket to the storytelling space—her license to speak further about her authentic experience. For example:

I am a sex worker who hates the sex industry. (Adorable "What Antis")

I have been a sex worker for seven years and hate most men, I am repulsed by them, as well as capitalism, civilization and work in general. I want it all to go. (Wendy)

This sex worker of 9 years feels the same way. (BP)

Sex worker of nearly 2 years ... I approve very much of this. (Rose)

As a sex worker for the past 3 years, I applaud this article. (Magdalene Hart)

The repetition of these words across dozens of sex workers' writings and other autobiographical practices; the emphasis sex workers place on the length of their tenure in the sex industry; the way the license to advocate is made contingent on the assumption of a sex working identity—these qualities speak to the *urgency* of the demand for authenticity that sex workers face. But it is also integration into advocacy discourse of a premise that cements our understanding of sex work not as practice (what one does) but as essence (what one *is*). As a delimitation of sex working essence, identification is also normative. Uttering the phrase "I am a sex worker" establishes the

speaker not only as an authentic voice, but also as a subject whose coherency is dependent on her fit, in form and character, into the established boundaries that make her identifiable as a type. Those boundaries are what are being negotiated when happy hooker stories are politicized and negative experiences are denied.

One unhappy life experience that is regularly disavowed in sex workers' rights advocacy – as seen in the “hook” that opened this essay – is the experience of childhood abuse. A post by escort Charlotte Shane to the sex worker blog *Tits and Sass*, for example, reads:

Bottom line: Not all sex workers were molested or beaten or criminally mistreated while growing up. Some of them were, just like some doctors and some teachers and some plumbers were. But it doesn't matter because—here's a radical thought—**whether or not any given sex worker has a tragic past is profoundly none of your business.** (“You've Got”; emphasis in original)

In the comments on the post, other sex workers respond:

Regards, A Not-Molested/Not-Drug-Addicted/Not-Pathological Webwhore (Gorey)
Cracks about my alleged daddy issues or how many times I must have been raped (guess what – none!- and the only attempt that was serious enough to frighten me was somebody who knew I was a stripper and thought I'd be easy in general) make me want to punch the people who make them. (Of many names...)

Shane's and the commenters' point is not to be missed: they leverage the politically necessary narrative of experiencing no more victimization than the average person in a bid for sex workers' right to privacy. That is, they deny past victimization in an effort to prevent another kind of victimization in the present. But this myth-busting advocacy also distances sex workers from the stigma attached to victims of sexual assault and abuse.

According to sex work and anti-rape activist Jane Doe, women's sexuality is dealt with in "good girl/bad girl dichotomies" (189). Doe argues that the stigma associated with both prostitution and rape leads sex working and sexually assaulted women to put "a foot in each" category, simultaneously represented as victims and dangers—with no space for women to behave otherwise (189). Disavowing experiences of victimization does not challenge this organization of good and bad lives, but rather attempts to move sex workers within it. By eliminating the image of sex workers as damaged, fallen women, advocates hope to shift sex work entirely into the "good girl" category.

Even in comments that push back against this renunciation of victimization, advocates deny any causal connection between the experience of victimization and the decision to sell sex. For example, commenter Olivia expresses concern, in response to Shane's post, that some sex workers "really want to totally distance themselves from this stereotype because, honestly, I've known a shit-ton of sex workers who were abused as children" (comment to "You've Got"). She goes on to make space in the happy hooker narrative and its normative sex working identity for sex workers who have been abused but have overcome such experiences:

I remember sitting around a dungeon with a group of girls sharing their experiences of abuse and it was like, THIS is sex work's connection to abuse— an incredibly supportive group of women (and men! just not in that case) who didn't let something fucked up inflicted on them as children ultimately dictate what their sexuality/sexual 'deviancy'/career path should or shouldn't be, and being able to safely and openly discuss it. (Olivia)

Reframed in this manner, discussion of the fact of abuse in some sex workers' lives becomes not an expression of unhappy affect, but rather the narration of an ultimately *positive* sex working experience.

As Canadian activist Wendy Babcock describes in a public Facebook post, reprinted on a Canadian law school blog after her death: "I remember when I first got involved in sex worker rights ... when I mentioned that I didn't like sex work myself I was chastised by fellow activists" ("Can A Person"). The normative formation of the happy hooker identity extends beyond including only those who have not experienced (or who have overcome) victimization. It goes a step further, demanding that even sex workers whose feelings and experiences are accurately represented in the status of victim deny the victimization against which they are struggling. Those who cannot or will not do so are delegitimized as authentic sex working voices and candidates for inclusion in the good life.

Armed with feel-good stories, sexually abused or assaulted sex workers *can* join the ranks of the properly political, but only on the condition of denying an affective relation between experiences of victimization and their decisions to do sex work. For Olivia, the disavowal is in sex workers' refusal to "let something fucked up inflicted on them as children ultimately dictate" the sex work they do in their adult lives. Likewise, for Shane, that a traumatic history is "profoundly none of your business" is not just because sex workers should be entitled to privacy, but also because the experience of abuse is to be understood as *unconnected* to the experience of doing sex work. What gets left out by this distancing is discussion of how histories of victimization might condition one's affective response to sex work, determining in advance who will have the capacity to enjoy sex work and who will not.

When the capacity to make others feel good about sex work is a precondition for political citizenship, the modulation of affective capacity implicates not only discourse, but also the material conditions in which sex work occurs, in the production of good and bad lives. It is possible, through victimization and abuse, to *create* unhappy sex workers whose very unhappiness delegitimizes their claim to the right to better material conditions. Melissa Petro comments that her determination to be sex positive – to deny that her sex work was harmful to her – kept her “working in the sex industry long after I stopped enjoying the work and well after it was financially necessary, as if by quitting I would be admitting that I was wrong for ever having done it in the first place” (“The H Word”). In this experience, sex working life edges towards the fixed form of its representation in discourse—it becomes a state in which one is stuck, an identity manifested as material reality. Petro, who ultimately felt harmed by her time in the sex industry, experienced worsened material conditions as a result of her attempt to be a happy hooker.

Speaking to negative sex working experiences while attempting to contort their lives into an ill-fitting positive identity also drains unhappy sex workers’ emotional resources. Sex workers speaking about their unhappy experiences report sensations of negation that place tremendous strain on their personal energies. Babcock, along with former sex workers Olive (“10 Tips”) and Hadil Habiba (“The Ugly Truth”), write that sex workers with bad experiences are “not heard,” don’t exist, and are “erased,” respectively, while Habiba notes a sense of exhaustion over being “sucked in” to the feminist debate. As sex workers struggle against expulsion to the bad life, the negation of unhappy experience instills in unhappy whores an intimately-felt sense of their own lives as politically and affectively non-existent. These are complaints that go beyond mere

rhetoric and representation, speaking to sex workers' physical and psychic energy and to their senses of themselves as existing—as life.

Sex workers' advocacy discourse responds to the autobiographical injunction and to the abandonment of affectively unpleasant bodies by leveraging a politically necessary narrative of happiness and not only disavowing, but also silencing, unhappy stories. The pressure to fit into the boundaries of the sex working type by adapting one's life and affect to match the politically necessary story causes unhappy sex workers emotional and material harm, including by leading some sex workers to continue doing sex work when they do not want to. But other unhappy whores respond to their feelings by trying to leave the sex industry. Unhappy exiting stories are the focus of the next section of this paper.

II. A Virtual Geography of the Sex Industry

It feels like common sense to say that sex workers who are unhappy selling sex should find some other way to survive. But one of sex workers' most common unhappy tales is the story of getting stuck in the sex industry. Sex workers struggle against discrimination, poverty and other barriers to career transition, and their post-sex-work trajectories are often limited. From the sticky ground of the sex working bad life, sex workers' writings spatialize the process of getting into and out of sex work, not only making “exit” an apt term, worth reclaiming from abolitionists, but also forming a discursive “space” of sex work, from which one might seek exit or distance as a politicizing strategy.

As Ahmed writes, affects do not just stick to bodies—they also get bodies “stuck.” Many sex workers report being stuck in the sex industry. For some, leaving the sex industry entirely never happens—they leave their jobs as frontline sex workers by transitioning to other roles

within the sex industry (Wylde, Alptraum). Others leave and then return. The author of *An Exotic Escort's Diary* makes poignant the industry's revolving door in an anecdote:

I will never forgot the words, “*She'll be back,*” said by a Madame (brothel/escort business owner) at an establishment I worked at overseas. This was after a popular young woman decided it was her last day in the industry, and she wanted to pursue her new “normal” job and boyfriend. *She'll be back*.....how discouraging, yet later I realized how real the statement actually was. (Anonymous B; emphasis in original)

The “real”ness of continual, inevitable return to the sex industry underscores how affects materialize for sex workers. Barred from rights discourse by their unhappiness, unhappy whores are also barred from the right to non-sex employment in real life.

While Petro associates her difficulty leaving the sex industry with her attempt to be a happy hooker, other workers experience unhappiness as a result of their difficulties leaving the sex industry. These difficulties follow several common paths. One is the experience of being “outed” (exposed as a current or former sex worker) or of living in fear of being outed. Kitty Stryker and Mich Masoch, in personal essays considering the barriers to leaving the sex industry, both comment on the fates of other workers who were not able to keep their sex working identities secret and the anxiety they feel about being next (“Branded” and “Crossing the Rubicon,” respectively). This is a reasonable fear—as Eric Barry and an anonymous writer for *Hook Online* demonstrate in their blog posts about being fired when their work as hustlers was discovered by their bosses (“Dear God” and “You’re FIRED,” respectively) and “Duke University porn star” Belle Knox shows in her experience of tremendous bullying by classmates upon her outing in 2014 (“From Belle”).

Petro's outing by the *New York Post*, which led to the loss of her post-sex-work job as an elementary school teacher, serves as a worst-case example for any other sex worker who fears outing. In articles calling her an "idiot prosti-teacher" (Peysner), the *Post* ensured that Petro's past in the sex industry would subsume her post-sex-work identity and activities for years to come. Petro used autobiographical essays to launch a career as a freelance writer and creative writing teacher after her outing, but she noted:

Men who abuse women and behave outside the sexual norm *are* the norm. Eventually, they're allowed to slowly leave that rubber room, to recede back into their former existences, while us bad girls are branded for life. ("We Pardon Spitzer")

Petro's imagery begins to hint at the construction of the sex industry, and the "bad life" that some workers experience there, as space. The images of being trapped in a "rubber room" and being "branded" evoke a sense of loss of self – to psychiatric incarceration and to slavery – while also concretizing the experience of being stuck in sex work as analogous to being physically locked up. Because having sex work "stuck" to her dragged Petro back into the sex industry's bad life, even years after she had ceased to do sex work, it makes sense that she would leverage a metaphor of imprisonment to describe her loss of political citizenship. Mirroring Petro's sentiment, Valentine, an escort and former porn model and stripper, writes that "My relationship to sex work is so complicated. It feels comfortable and familiar, but also like a trap that I worry I'll never be able to escape" ("It Happened").

The slip from loss of affective citizenship to trapping of the material body in sex work has severe consequences for some sex workers. While, as I discuss below, many sex workers politicize their "imprisonment" in the sex industry, a few find their way out by ending their lives. Alyssa Funke, a university student who was outed after doing one scene for the porn company

Casting Couch, committed suicide in 2014 in response to vicious bullying from classmates (Knox). In an open letter to the dead woman, Belle Knox, a porn actor who was outed a few months earlier in 2014, writes of her own suicidal ideation:

I wanted to just die. I fantasized of what this would do to my bullies and tormenters. I went to the most morbid places I ever thought possible.

The headline even flashed before my eyes: “Duke porn star commits suicide.” (“From Belle”)

Of course, it is not necessarily the sex industry, but the crisis of being outed and being unable to escape association with the sex industry, that drives sex workers to suicide. As pornographer Conner Habib writes with reference to the suicide death of chemist Arpad Miklos, who performed in gay porn: “Why are we asking, ‘What is it with gay porn?’ but not asking, ‘What is it with the way society treats people who bring them pleasure?’” (“Why Do”). Bad lives are produced socially, always in relation to those on the other side of the threshold. When sex workers are denied the rights of citizenship through outing and bullying and then die by suicide, they respond not only to their own bad lives but also to the agency of those who remain political citizens to continually define some lives as ungrievable.

But metaphors of space do not just speak to the imprisonment and death of sex working bodies. They are also used to describe distance from and attachment to the sex industry. These metaphors of space, location and mobility take many forms in sex workers’ autobiographical practices: writers speak of windows of opportunity (Alptraum), “Crossing the Rubicon” (Masoch), being “dragged through a circle of hell” (Masoch), knowing “what you’re getting into” (Alptraum), leaving the “world of porn” (Alptraum). Kitty Stryker describes entry to the

sex industry as literal travel and a simultaneous transformation from a “nobody” to a glamorous sex worker:

“I came up with the name Kitty Stryker when flying from Massachusetts to California. [...] Katy was dorky, not very popular, struggled in crowds of people, and was suicidally depressed. Katy couldn't step out from under the shadow of her teenage years. In contrast, Kitty was sexy, flirty and confident. Kitty was politically active and internet savvy, had a lot of friends and was popular. Kitty was going West, to seek her fortune by doing things she loved that also increased her awareness. (“Branded”)

Reflecting the prerequisite for normative sex working identity, one of the qualities that differentiate “Kitty” from “Katy” in this narrative is Kitty’s capacity to disavow her past. For Stryker, sex work is where one goes to become someone else: someone invulnerable and happy.

Stryker uses another travel narrative to mark her decision to leave the sex industry, when her working conditions became intolerable:

Returning to San Francisco after working in London, England was pretty difficult for me. There were many differences: In London, I could be open about being a sex worker and was usually treated with respect, my fat body was a thing of desire, and the legality of my work meant I could call the police for support. In stark contrast, I found myself opened up to all sorts of critique and abuse when I didn't take a client on in San Francisco, and the illegal, stigmatized status of sex work meant that I had little recourse. (“Branded”)

In this passage, Stryker transforms back from glamorous sex worker to unpopular, undesirable, abused “nobody.” But in both of the above passages, Stryker is travelling to San Francisco to do sex work. Invulnerable or victimized, happy or unhappy, the destination is the same—a predicament mirrored by her lack of success at finding a non-sex job (“Branded”). While the

overt messaging of Stryker's story discusses the failure of "exit programs" to meet sex workers' real transition needs, the imagery included here also advances a narrative about identity and affect. While Stryker turned to sex work in order to adopt a happy sex working identity, her eventual unhappiness with sex work did not make her *not* a sex worker. Instead it trapped her in a bad life: no longer invulnerable as a happy, rights-seeking sex worker, but unable to escape the sex industry nonetheless.

Likewise, metaphors of space and place allow former hustler Eric Barry to describe his experience of being stuck in sex work in a way that implicates the *virtual* space of the internet in the trap. He writes:

[R]ent looms. Every day Google, Facebook, and Apple shuttles stop in front of my house, dropping off legions of 20-somethings freshly fed their gourmet meals and stock options. Gentrification abounds in this city, unaware of the people and culture it's displacing. A one-bedroom apartment four blocks from me goes for \$4k a month, and this city isn't getting any better.

San Francisco, Chicago, New York. Boulder, Madison, Austin. Kansas City, D.C.,
Detroit. Anywhere. Dear god, I need a job. ("Dear God")

Barry's willingness to move is contrasted against Google's, Facebook's and Apple's enormous capacity not only to claim the virtual space of the internet, but also to "fix" (to correct and to fasten or make permanent; cf. Antwi and Dean) the city itself by displacing politically abandoned lives. Many sex workers cite traces of their sex working personae kept permanently on the internet (Alptraum; Anonymous A) as one of the barriers to exiting the industry, making it all the more appropriate that Barry would gesture towards the corporate structures of the internet

in his story about getting stuck on the wrong side of the threshold between the good life and the bad.

Because sex workers use metaphors of space and imprisonment to narrate their difficulties leaving the sex industry, I believe the language of “exiting,” regardless of its appropriation by abolitionist organizations, is affectively appropriate language for an experience with enormous political relevance for sex workers, and especially for those who are unhappy. Metaphors are not just a luxury of literary expression; they are our ways of making and sharing the meaning of our lives. As such, they are territory that should not be ceded to those who do not represent our political interests. While the language of transition may be more politically useful to some sex workers (cf. Law), “exiting” may more accurately describe the experiences of those facing difficulty leaving the sex industry, who do indeed feel trapped in sex work and are indeed seeking distance or escape.

Conclusion: More-than-Survival Strategies

Unhappy whores get stuck in a bad life, affectively and literally. While their unhappiness limits their claim to sex workers’ rights, their sex work limits their capacity to move on to other forms of employment. In both cases, political citizenship – whether in the form of affective acknowledgement or bearable material conditions – is located beyond the boundaries of the space occupied by unhappy sex workers. But these boundaries do not go uncontested. Butler argues that in order to be political from within the bad life, one must, first, blur the boundary between public and private that assigns bad lives to the realm of the pre-political. Second, one must critique the social order that differentiates valuable lives from worthless ones. Third, and finally, one must refuse to disavow vulnerability (16-17).

Blurring the boundary between public and private, for sex workers writing about their lives online, means politicizing those experiences and feelings that have been eschewed by mainstream sex workers' rights advocacy. Petro writes that while sex work *is* work, it is not “*just* work” (“The H Word”):

I wanted to be beautiful. I wanted to be taken care of. I wanted to be rescued. I was sexualized long before I sexualized myself. Even as a child, I knew the way men looked at me. I knew what it meant. [...]

Growing up in a home without food, you are always hungry and every kind of hunger, it seems, feels like you are starving. Of such an appetite, you become ashamed. When your needs become confused with desires, you always want more. In a world of unreliable people, you learn to rely on yourself. Stripping was one way I learned to get noticed, and being noticed—I thought—is what it took to survive. (“The H Word”)

Petro's narrative makes clear that, for her, sex work is connected to her childhood experiences of emotional and economic neglect. Rather than framing the harms she experienced – as a child and in sex work – as private, Petro uses them to dramatize the gendered, working-class disenfranchisement that earned her a “lack of equal access to meaningful work” (“The H Word”). She remains firm in her support for decriminalization of prostitution, but in writing about her sex working experiences as conditioned by habit, trauma and affect, Petro produces a story of her sex work that considers the possibility that under other circumstances she might *not* have been a sex worker.

Where happy narratives help to stabilize the figure of the sex worker as a free, rational actor who enjoys her work and her sexual liberation, unhappy sex workers sit in limbo: on the one hand referred to as what politicized sex workers are not, and on the other hand politicizing

their unhappiness by suggesting that they might never have done sex work, except for their disenfranchisement as a class. “The truth doesn’t have a sound bite,” writes Habiba, “It’s complex. There are just as many people who are in danger in the sex trade as there are people who aren’t, and sometimes that’s the same person at different times” (“The Ugly Truth”). This *unfixing* of identity gestures towards a state of flux, from which a politics of *more-than-survival* – a politics of distance from the bad life – might be drawn. If happiness and unhappiness both lead disenfranchised sex workers to doing sex work for survival, then a more-than-survival strategy involves critique of that disenfranchisement.

Former sex worker Audacia Ray reads a “deep doubt about the validity of the sex positive argument” in sex positive advocacy’s disavowal of that which is understood to be negative. She argues that if sex positivity cannot account for unpleasant, unjust or traumatic experience in sex work, then “the concept of being a sex positive sex worker is a self-serving marketing practice, in which the enjoyment of sexuality is being sold as a product to both workers and our clients” (“Why the Sex”). The act of telling an unhappy story critiques the social order that disenfranchises women, the poor and sex workers, raising the question of *why* all roads lead to the same place and what advocacy would look like if sex workers were unwilling to cede their affective capacities to commodification.

When sex workers are unwilling to cede their affective capacities, they tell stories that destabilize the boundaries of sex working identity and the boundary between political citizenship and abandonment. Petro’s advice to other sex workers who want to write their life stories is to “Be as real as you can be.... Aim for a harder, more complicated truth” (“The H Word”). What unhappy sex workers are telling us with their stories is that there is more to seeking human and

labour rights than just getting out from under the “abuse” paradigm. As former underage prostitute Emi Koyama writes:

I started to think that we need to honor and embrace weakness, vulnerability, and passivity as well, or else we end up blaming and invalidating victims (including myself) who do not feel strong some or most of the times. (“The Uses of Negativity”)

Sex work happens in a bad world: one where many people suffer unfairly and do things that hurt them in order to survive. Unhappy sex workers’ writing forces us to face the reality that the structures that distinguish good lives from bare survival have victims. By refusing to let victimization push them out of political space, unhappy whores politicize their victimization, calling on sex worker advocates not to ask for a place at the table in the good life, but to do the much harder work of dismantling the social order that victimizes them in the first place.

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